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Conventions of Language Study

English 30 Diploma Examinations January and June 1993
Major Assignment: Literature Composition
3-Satisfactory on Matters of Convention

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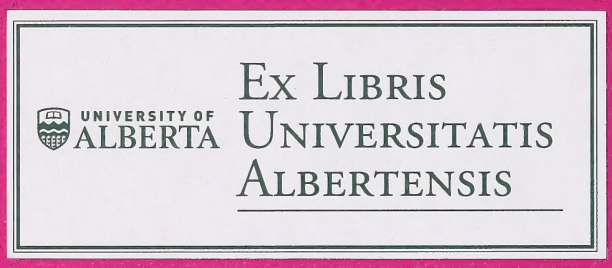
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Conventions of Language Study

English 30 Diploma Examinations January and June 1993
Major Assignment: Literature Composition
3-Satisfactory on Matters of Convention

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But They Still Can't Spell?

A Study of English 30 Students' Application of Conventions of Language

Everyone who teaches English, and just about everyone who has children in school has heard the public's belief that graduates of our schools can't spell and/or write correctly. This belief is not new. However, it seems to surface more frequently in uncertain times.

English teachers are also aware that students' skills in expressing complex ideas clearly and correctly are diverse and difficult to alter, and that the issue of correct language is much more intricate than correct spelling. How to teach students to write thoughtfully, precisely, and correctly is the subject of volumes of professional discourse, hours of staff-room debate, and years of red ink on less than adequate student papers.

Of course, the issue of correctness of expression has been a matter for considerable debate and consideration relative to the Diploma Examination Program. The scoring criteria for the English 30 and English 33 diploma exams (and for the Social Studies 30 exam and the Language Arts achievement tests) have addressed language correctness within the broader context of other features of writing—organization of ideas, control of style, and, in particular, the quality of thought. As well, the standards for correctness of expression are based on what can reasonably be expected in first draft work produced under exam conditions.

Because the public and the profession remain concerned about how correctly students can express themselves, the Humanities Diploma Exam staff undertook a study of language correctness in English 30 examination papers written in January and June 1993. The article that follows describes that study.

Background

In 1989–90, the Humanities Diploma Exam staff increased the standard in all scoring categories at 3-Satisfactory in English 30 in response to the University of Alberta's decision to drop its **Writing Competence Test.** Members of the University of Alberta/Student Evaluation Branch joint committee who monitored the English 30 exams for the next two years observed that the standard, as represented in sample papers, was higher than it had been between 1984 and 1989, and was acceptable. The Humanities Diploma Exam staff continued to pay close attention to the kind of work that received 3-Satisfactory for *Matters of Convention* in English 30. Observations of staff members and markers, and analysis of results indicated that this higher standard was met by students, and remained relatively stable over the next two years.

Nonetheless, the general public belief prevailed that even with provincial exams and rigorous expectations, graduates of our schools could not write correct prose.

In September 1992, the Student Evaluation Branch held the second in a series of *Public Advisory Committee* meetings to consider the expectations inherent in the curriculum and in the diploma examinations for English 30 and English 33. The members of this committee represented professional organizations, business and industry, post-secondary institutions, and other groups with expressed interest in education. The committee discussed a wide variety of issues in the context of a review of curriculum expectations and examination standards and results.

During its deliberations, the committee considered the expectations for correctness of expression as reflected in the scoring criteria and sample student papers in English 30 and English 33. The consensus was that the standard for correctness of expression in English 33 was ***not*** high enough. Although the committee generally agreed that the sample papers in English 30 represented acceptable correctness of expression, some committee members remained unconvinced.

The consequence of these discussions was that in January 1993, we established a higher standard for *Writing Skills* and *Matters of Convention* in English 33. This standard is now essentially the same as the standard for English 30. What differs is the difficulty of the assigned writing tasks. The consequence of the increase in standard was that, in 1993, markers awarded more scores of 2-Limited for *Matters of Convention* and *Writing Skills* in English 33 than they had in previous years.

We did not change the standard in English 30 in 1993, but we did continue to monitor the application of the existing standard. Staff observations, markers' comments, and some particularly "wild" papers that were rescored at students' request, led us to wonder if the established standard was being applied as intended to papers that received 3-Satisfactory for *Matters of Convention*. As well, we began to question whether the expectation represented by the standard was adequate, given even more public commentary about spelling and correctness of language.

It was in this context that the Humanities Diploma Exam staff members decided to look more closely at correctness of language in English 30 exam papers. We designed a relatively simple quantitative study and proceeded with a trial run in May 1993. The remainder of this article is a description of what we did, a discussion of the resulting data, and some speculation about what the data might mean to classroom practice.

The Study

The study and its questions were confined to English 30 diploma examination papers written and scored in January and June 1993. The **only** scoring category considered was *Matters of Convention* for the ***Major Assignment: Literature Composition***. The only level of performance studied was **3-Satisfactory** on that scoring category.

For readers who are not familiar with the English 30 diploma examination, the assignment requires each student to write a literary essay that discusses a given theme relative to literature that the student selects for discussion. Students are expected to select literature from their English 30 course of study. Teacher-markers score this essay in five categories: *Total Impression*, *Thought and Detail*, *Organization*, *Matters of Choice* (style), and *Matters of Convention* (correctness of grammar, mechanics, spelling, etc.). Each category has a 5-point set of criteria that describes quality (5-Excellent, 4-Proficient, 3-Satisfactory, 2-Limited, and 1-Poor). Work of acceptable quality is awarded 3-Satisfactory. The total mark value of these five categories is 35 marks out of the 50 exam marks. The *Matters of Convention* category contributes 5 of these 35 marks. Students' papers are read and scored independently by three teachers. These scores are combined to produce the student's mark on the essay exam. (See the Appendix for the criteria for *Matters of Convention* and for the revisions made to these criteria following the study.)

Key Questions

We asked four questions to guide the study:

- What kinds of errors in language and expression are common in English 30 papers that received scores of 3-Satisfactory for *Matters of Convention*?
- How many errors of what kinds are typical in such papers?
- What is the relative complexity and length of such papers?
- Is the awarded score of 3-Satisfactory for *Matters of Convention* appropriate?

The Sample

For the study, we selected 160 papers at random from January and June 1993 English 30 papers that had received scores on the **Major Assignment** as follows:

Group One — from all three markers, scores of 3-Satisfactory on all scoring categories *

Group Two — from all three markers, scores of 3-Satisfactory on *Matters of Convention*, but 2-Limited on *Thought and Detail*

Group Three — from all three markers, scores of 3-Satisfactory on *Matters of Convention,* but 4-Proficient on *Thought and Detail*

Most of the papers in the sample were from Group One (100 papers or 59%). We wanted to examine essays that the original markers considered to be within the range of 3-Satisfactory for all categories so that the reviewers would not be distracted by peculiarities of thought and organization.

We included groups two and three in the sample to extend the range of quality of thought in the essays being examined since one of our questions had to do with the relationship between complexity of thought and incidence of error. However, our principal task remained to try to find out how many errors of what kind were most common in essays that the original markers considered generally "Satisfactory."

**Of the 11 339 papers scored in January 1993, only 90 papers (0.79%) received 3-Satisfactory on all major assignment scoring categories from all three markers. Of the 15 224 papers scored in June 1993, 125 (0.82%) received 3-Satisfactory on all major assignment categories from all three markers. This means that markers make distinctions among the categories, and most papers are "uneven" in accomplishment.*

The Process

In March 1993, we tested a procedure and developed a list of errors that we considered identifiable, likely to occur, and worthy of attention—for example, spelling, subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, comma splice. Our goal was to have a classification system that would allow each reader to classify errors consistently.

Developing this classification list proved more difficult than we had originally anticipated. Our first draft list of errors did not work because it did not include all of the most common problems. As well, some frequently occurring problems were difficult to label. The errors that were the most difficult to label were usage errors that we eventually called *"Wrong Word."* These were problems of words being misused—words that have meanings other than what the student could possibly have intended—rather than words that were less than effective or unacceptable choices of diction. By

the end of our reading session in March, we had a grid that listed specific errors under six headings: *Sentence Structure/Construction*, *Punctuation*, *Pronouns*, *Verbs*, *Usage*, and *Spelling*. (The complete grid is in the Appendix.)

In July 1993, a group of five English 30 teachers, all experienced diploma exam markers and confirmers of standards, used the grid that we developed in the March trial to classify the errors in each of the papers selected for the study.

The reviewers applied the grid to several papers to ensure that in all cases they were classifying errors in the same way. As well, they agreed about what they would consider to be an error. If style manuals did not concur in the acceptability of a particular feature, the reviewers always ruled in favour of the student. For example, because some manuals prefer commas following introductory phrases, and others consider this optional, the reviewers did not consider the absence of such commas an error.

The reviewers also estimated the length of the essays, and noted the relative complexity of what the student was attempting in the essay. Finally, each reviewer commented on whether or not the paper should have received a score of 3-Satisfactory for *Matters of Convention*.

The Results

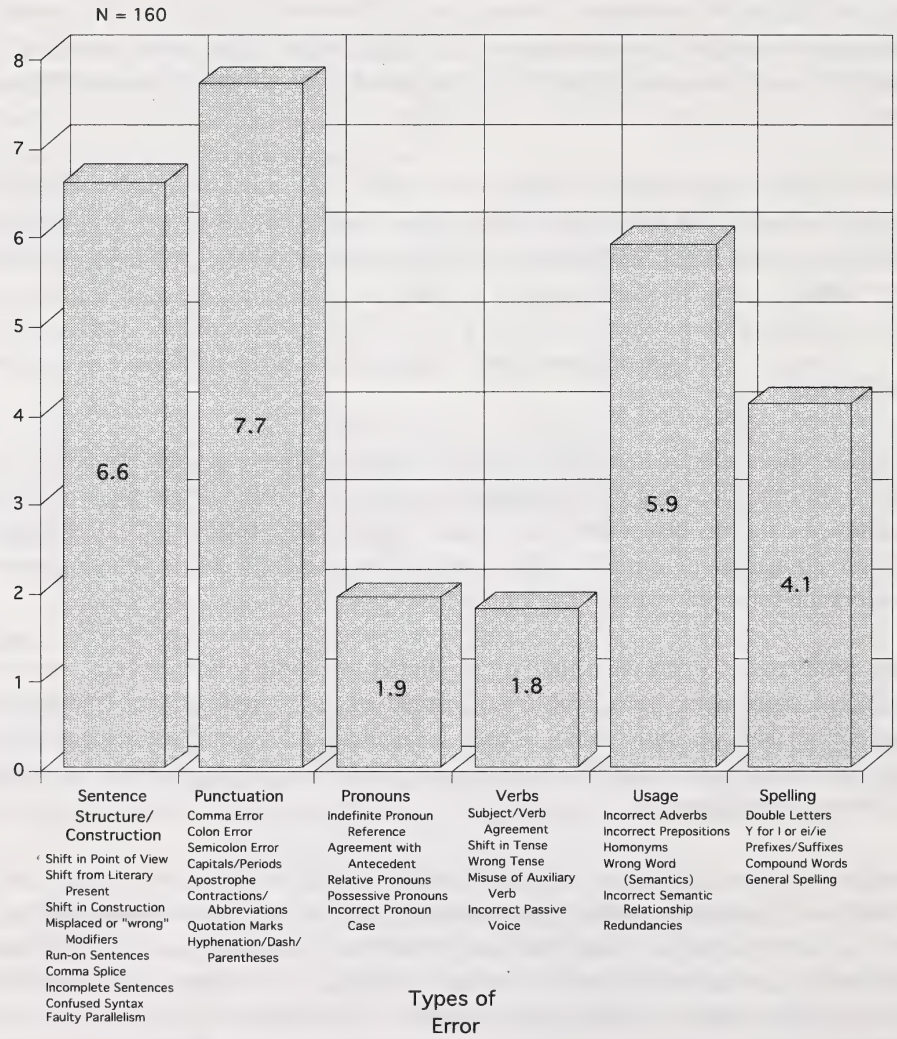
In considering results, readers should keep in mind that the reviewers considered only errors—not other features of the students' essays. As well, so that we would have quantitative data, reviewers counted errors. This is **not** a recommended method for dealing with matters of correctness in an instructional setting. Nor is counting errors a consideration for diploma exam marking.

Those problems of expression that we predicted would be common (e.g., pronoun-antecedent agreement, verb problems) proved to be somewhat less frequent and troublesome than we anticipated. Other problems that we had not expected (e.g., confusion of syntax and problems with semantics) emerged as being serious, pervasive, and demanding of attention.

On average, these 3-Satisfactory essays each had 28 errors of varying degrees of seriousness. This appears to be a large number of errors, but it has meaning only in the context of type of error, and the length and complexity of the essay. In considering the data from this study, readers should keep in mind that it is the nature of the errors rather than simply the number of errors that becomes truly significant. Although this was a quantitative study, its usefulness lies in the discussions of the qualitative features of the errors that students make.

Figure 1 shows the average number of errors in 3-Satisfactory essays in each of the classification categories. The order in Figure 1 matches the grid that reviewers used for tabulating errors (see Appendix). Tables 1 to 7 summarize types and proportion of errors in each classification. These tables are accompanied by discussions of incidence of error in each classification. The findings about length and relative complexity follow. Figure 2 (page 14) shows the reviewers' opinions about the more appropriate *Matters of Convention* score for the essays studied.

Figure 1: Average Number of Errors per Essay by Category



Numbers and Types of Errors by Category

Punctuation

The category in which the largest number of errors occurred was *Punctuation*. On average, there were 7.7 punctuation errors in these 3-Satisfactory essays. Comma and apostrophe errors were by far the greatest contributors to problems with punctuation. **Only 7.5% of the essays had no comma errors**, and 45.1% had between 4 and 7 comma errors; 41.3% of these essays had from 1 to 3 apostrophe errors.

Table 1: Incidence and Type of Punctuation Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Comma Error	**7.5**	**35.7**	**56.9**
Colon Error	95.6	4.4	—
Semicolon Error	80.6	17.5	1.9
Capitals/ Periods	75.0	23.8	1.2
Apostrophe	**37.5**	**41.3**	**21.2**
Contractions/Abbreviations	98.1	1.9	—
Quotation Marks	87.5	12.5	—
Hyphenation/Dash/Parentheses	76.3	23.1	0.6

Average number of punctuation errors per essay = 7.7

Errors in punctuation do not always create problems with communication clarity, and they are relatively easy to correct. However, students do need to be taught how to use punctuation correctly in their own work. As well, they need practice in locating and correcting their own errors.

The frequency of punctuation errors in these essays receiving 3-Satisfactory perhaps suggests a general lack of knowledge of the conventions of print, and perhaps, lack of appreciation of the relationship between punctuation and precise meaning. It is possible that the students who are performing at 3-Satisfactory do not read extensively.

This information about punctuation should be useful for classroom teachers particularly in elementary and junior high schools, because direct instruction about punctuation is feasible, and it is likely to be profitable if such instruction is always connected to *students' own writing*. As well, the habit of reading widely and extensively must be developed in the early years of schooling if it is to be developed at all.

Sentence Structure/Construction

The category with the second largest number of errors per essay was *Sentence Structure/Construction*. Unlike most errors in punctuation, errors in this category frequently interfere with precise and clear communication. Errors in this category also often suggest muddled thinking, and leave the reader to supply meaning.

Most of the sentence construction errors were errors that the reviewers classified as *Confused Syntax* . **Only 35.6% of the essays had no errors in syntax**; 55% had from 1 to 3 such errors, and almost 10% of the essays had four or more syntactical errors.

The following are examples of sentences in which the syntax is confused. There are other errors in the example sentences (notably run-on problems in the first example), but the result is that these sentences do not convey the writer's thought clearly:

> *"Willy's conflict of him not being a success and his sadness towards this is shown through the many times in which he has smashed up the car, and his ajustment [sic] to the gas pipe, with the cord Willy is completely disillusioned by this."*

> *"Now some people find that life is boring and that maybe they were put in, and are leading the wrong one."*

Table 2: Incidence and Type of Sentence Structure/ Construction Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Shift in Point of View	72.5	26.9	0.6
Shift from Literary Present	53.8	42.5	3.8
Shift in Construction	66.9	29.4	3.8
Misplaced or "wrong" Modifiers	80.6	18.8	0.6
Run-on Sentences	66.9	31.3	1.8
Comma Splice	**45.0**	**45.7**	**9.4**
Incomplete Sentences	58.8	38.2	3.2
Confused Syntax	**35.6**	**55.0**	**9.3**
Faulty Parallelism	74.4	25.6	—

Average number of sentence construction errors per essay = 6.6

Addressing confusion in sentence construction is much more complex than addressing punctuation problems. Frequent writing practice that focuses on effectively communicating to readers, practice in reshaping sentences within longer texts to

communicate more precisely, and a heightened awareness of readers' needs—all might contribute to correcting this problem. Extensive reading, practice in presentation, as well as frequently hearing well-written text read are other key factors that will help in correcting problems with syntax. However, all such "remedies" must begin early in a student's school career and be continuous.

Usage

The next category with significant numbers of errors was *Usage*. Errors in usage averaged 5.9 per essay, and almost all were some version of the use of a word whose meaning could not have been intended. Most of the usage errors were in the category *Wrong Word*. **Only 16.9% of the essays did not have errors of word usage**. 50.7% of the essays had 1 to 3 such errors.

We did not anticipate the category *Wrong Word* when we began the study. However, once we began reading essays, it became apparent that we needed some consistent way to categorize such errors as:

> *". . . we need to escape because we cannot handle the* ***outlook.****"*
>
> *". . . the setting of this play is dull to emphasize the sadness and* ***pity*** *of Willy Loman's* ***character.****"*
>
> *". . . to demonstrate Willy's ability to handle it very* ***securely*** *."*
>
> *". . . we see how one boy becomes so obsessed with* ***leaving his lifestyle*** *and creating a new one . . . , that he* ***leads himself into unhappiness****."*

The second most frequent type of usage error was *Incorrect Prepositions*: 50% of the essays had from 1 to 3 errors in preposition use. In English, preposition usage is frequently idiomatic, and awareness of the correct usage comes from **hearing** correct expressions. Perhaps students make such errors because they are unfamiliar with the sound of correctly written English.

The data show that the ratio of number of usage errors to length is as one might predict: a somewhat higher incidence occurs in longer essays. On average, there were

- 8 usage errors in essays of over 600 words
- 3.3 usage errors in short papers of 200 to about 400 words

However, when complexity is considered, there is a different pattern in the usage errors. Essays that were without *any* complexity of thought, structure, or language still had an average of 3.25 usage errors. Essays of limited complexity—ie., essays that have single

and simple ideas expressed in simple language—had an average of 5.6 usage errors. Essays within the mid-range of complexity of thought, structure, and language averaged 6.6 usage errors. But those essays in which the writer attempted sophisticated analysis had an average of 4.25 usage errors.

These data indicate the predictable relationship between thought and language precision. **When the writer is in control of complex thought and related vocabulary, the incidence of "wrong words" decreases.**

Table 3: Incidence and Type of Usage Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Incorrect Adverbs	78.1	21.9	—
Incorrect Prepositions	**45.6**	**50.1**	**4.4**
Homonyms	68.8	30.7	0.6
Wrong Word (Semantics) *(other than verbs)*	**16.9**	**50.7**	**32.4**
Incorrect Semantic Relationship	62.5	29.4	8.1
Redundancies	73.1	26.4	0.6

Average number of usage errors per essay = 5.9

From the reviewers' discussions, markers' comments, confirmers of standards' comments, and staff observations about "problem" papers, we have concluded that this usage/semantics problem is widespread, serious, and a relatively recent phenomenon.

What is troubling about such imprecise usage is that it indicates equally imprecise thinking. As the demand for complex abstract thinking increases, so does the need to articulate such thinking. If a writer lacks understanding of what words actually mean, he or she is seriously hindered in thinking clearly and precisely.

The need for students of all ages to learn to use words accurately is clear. This need should pervade all language arts activities—spoken and written, heard and read. The attention to what words mean, to what words can be used with what other words, is essential from the earliest years of students' schooling.

Verbs and Pronouns

Errors associated with *Verbs* and *Pronouns* were **lowest** in incidence: an average of 1.9 pronoun errors per essay and 1.8 verb errors per essay. However, as Tables 4 and 5 show, a significant percentage of the essays reviewed had some pronoun and verb errors. Over 30% of the essays had 1 to 3 pronoun errors, and about 35% had 1 to 3 incorrect verb tenses. Incorrect verb tenses and pronoun reference errors confuse meaning.

Of interest is the relatively high correlation between incidence of verb error and multiple-choice score. The correlation data indicate that students who had trouble with verbs in their writing also had trouble with the reading component of the exam.

Table 4: Incidence and Type of Pronoun Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Indefinite Pronoun Reference	**59.4**	**35.6**	**5.0**
Agreement with Antecedent	67.5	32.6	—
Relative Pronouns	**66.3**	**33.1**	**0.6**
Possessive Pronouns	93.1	6.9	—
Incorrect Pronoun Case	90.6	9.4	—

Average number of pronoun errors per essay = 1.9

Table 5: Incidence and Type of Verb Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of Papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Subject/Verb Agreement	73.1	27.0	—
Shift in Tense	**64.4**	**31.3**	**4.4**
Wrong Tense	**63.1**	**35.1**	**1.9**
Misuse of Auxiliary Verb	82.5	16.9	0.6
Incorrect Passive Voice	96.9	3.1	—

Average number of verb errors per essay = 1.8

Spelling

And finally *Spelling*. This study confirmed that students who received 3-Satisfactory on their major exam essays can generally spell well, considering the circumstances under which they produced their writing. **These essays had an average of 4.1 spelling errors**.

What is important to note is that 45% of the essays were between 400 and 600 words long and 40.7% were 600 words or longer. The data on essay length provide the most appropriate context for the spelling data: 4 spelling errors per 500 words of first-draft exam writing is well within what can be reasonably expected. The more detailed classification of spelling errors did not show any patterns of error, except that prefix and suffix errors are the least common.

Table 6: Incidence and Type of Spelling Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Double Letters	81.9	17.5	0.6
Y for I or ei/ie	82.5	16.9	0.6
Prefixes/Suffixes	91.3	8.7	—
Compound Words	82.5	16.9	0.6
General Spelling	**17.5**	**46.3**	**36.3**

Average number of spelling errors per essay = 4.1

Length

In addition to tabulating errors according to the five categories discussed above, reviewers estimated the length of each essay. Results of these estimates are as follows:

Below 200 words— 2.0%
200–400 words—13.0%
400–600 words—45.0%
Above 600+ words—40.7%

As could be expected, the incidence of error increased as the length increased. The longer the essay, the more opportunity for error.

Degree of Complexity

Reviewers also indicated the complexity of the substance, language, and structure of each essay, and ranked the essays on a 5-point scale for complexity. Of the 160 essays reviewed, only 4 were considered to be highly complex, but 18 were considered to be above average in their complexity.

The incidence of error in the four highly complex papers was considerably lower than in the sample as a whole. Incidence of error in the papers ranked as having limited to medium complexity was roughly equal on average. For some of these writers who attempted complex discussions and/or unconventional structures, errors may have been a factor of the conditions of writing and thinking.

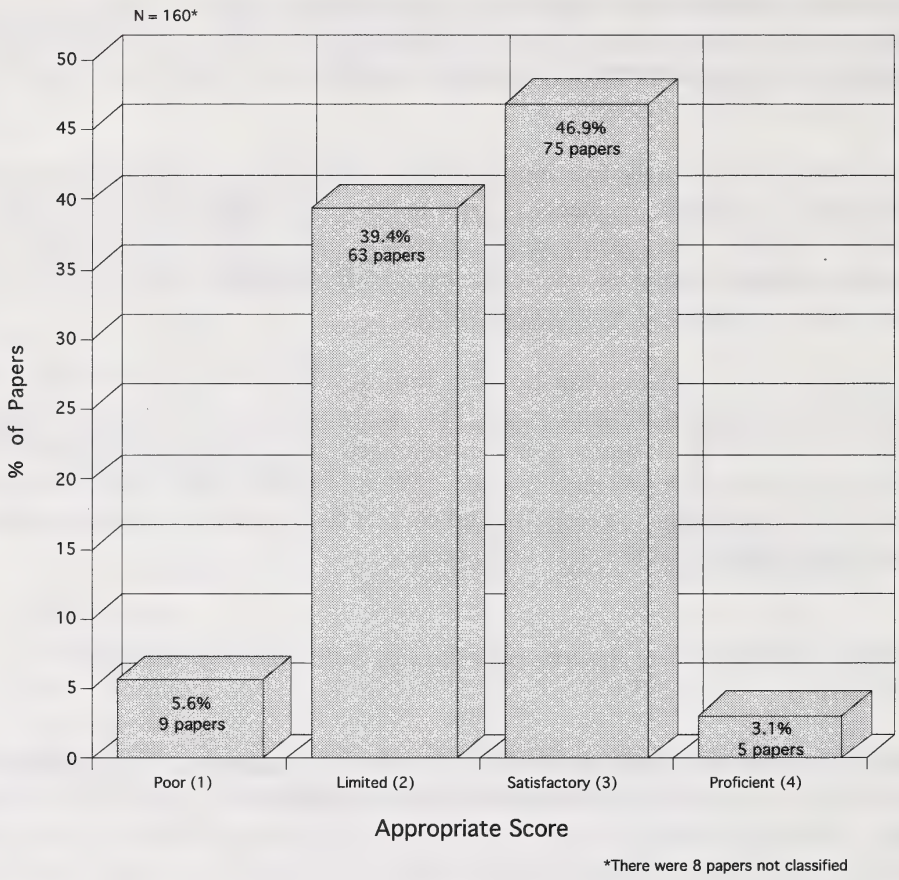
The question of the relationship between intricacy of thinking and structure and incidence of error is a difficult one. This study will **not** have served a useful instructional purpose if students are discouraged from attempting sophisticated discussions because they fear making errors. **What is needed is for students to have the skills and knowledge to recognize and correct their own errors, and to present complex discussions that are clear and precise**.

Judgements Regarding Appropriateness of Score for Matters of Convention

Finally, the reviewers considered whether the originally awarded score of 3-Satisfactory for *Matters of Convention* remained the most appropriate score, given their findings about numbers and kinds of errors in each essay. Reviewers were aware that their context for making this judgement was considerably different from the context of the original markers; however, one of the questions in the study related to how appropriately the standard was being applied for 3-Satisfactory in *Matters of Convention*.

The results of the judgements of the reviewers are summarized in ***Figure 2: Most Appropriate Score for Matters of Convention in Essays Reviewed***. These results confirm staff impressions and marker observations that in 1993 there were somewhat more 3-Satisfactory scores awarded for *Matters of Convention* than was appropriate.

Figure 2: Most Appropriate Score for Matters of Convention in Essays Reviewed



Summary of Most Frequent Errors

Table 7 summarizes incidence of the most frequent errors in the essays reviewed. As noted in the preceding discussion, the errors are not of equal weight or impact. The errors that contribute most to confused meaning are errors in syntax, semantics, pronoun reference, and verb tenses. These types of errors are also the most difficult to correct because they are related to thought. **If students lack the vocabulary and syntax through which to convey complex thought, they may lack access to complex thought itself**.

Table 7: Most Frequent Errors in Conventions of Language in "Satisfactory" English 30 Diploma Exam Essays

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4–5 Errors	6–8 Errors	9–10 Errors	11–20 Errors
Table 1: *Punctuation*						
Comma Error	7.5	35.7	26.9	20.1	5.0	4.9
Apostrophe	37.5	41.3	11.2	7.5	1.9	0.6
Table 2: *Sentence Structure/Construction*						
Comma Splice	45.0	45.7	6.9	1.9	—	0.6
Confused Syntax	35.6	55.0	6.9	1.2	—	1.2
Table 3: *Usage*						
Incorrect Prepositions	45.6	50.1	2.5	1.9	—	—
Wrong Word (Semantics)	16.9	40.7	20.6	9.4	—	2.4
Table 4: *Pronouns*						
Indefinite Pronoun Reference	59.4	35.6	5.0	—	—	—
Relative Pronouns	66.3	33.1	0.6	—	—	—
Table 5: *Verbs*						
Shift in Tense	64.4	31.3	4.4	—	—	—
Wrong Tense	63.1	35.1	1.9	—	—	—
Table 6: *Spelling*						
General Spelling	17.5	46.3	16.3	12.5	5.0	2.5

Immediate Implications of the Study

This study was an English 30 study designed to consider the standard as applied to one of the seven scoring categories used in 1993. The immediate consequence of the study was that the reviewers recommended a revised scoring guide for *Matters of Convention*. They believed that a more specific guide would help markers to be more accurate in their application of the standard.

Consequently, the reviewers and a group of teachers who had just completed marking the June 1993 exams drafted a revision immediately upon the completion of the study. The revised criteria for *Matters of Convention* were renamed *Matters of Correctness* (see Appendix), and they are quite specific. The standard remains the same. However, the revision committee believed that the name change will convey more clearly to students what is expected of them. The committee believed that the revised wording of the criteria will make appropriate application of the standard easier for markers. These new criteria will be implemented in January 1994, and they are published in the *English*

30 and *English 33 Information Bulletins** distributed to schools in September 1993 for use by teachers and students. Teachers' initial responses to the revisions have been very positive.

**Note: the criteria in the scoring category Matters of Correctness are identical for English 30 and for English 33. This represents an increase in standard for English 33 and a clarification of the standard for English 30.*

Conclusions

Although this study was limited, it confirmed many general observations of teacher-markers, Student Evaluation Branch staff, and classroom teachers. What was confirmed is that, contrary to public opinion, graduating students can spell quite well even under trying conditions. The kinds of problems in expression that emerged are considerably more troubling than spelling problems because syntactical and semantic problems are not easily "corrected" or even identified by people who are not highly trained. Furthermore, the kinds of errors that confuse meaning create more serious havoc than do "surface" or "cosmetic" errors. A student writer who is an able proofreader can find and correct almost all spelling and most punctuation errors. However, if the writer lacks vocabulary and a repertoire of syntactical structures, usage and sentence construction errors are almost impossible to fix.

We can only speculate about the causes of such errors of imprecision—lack of practice in writing and editing, lack of extensive reading experience, lack of practice in attending to meaning of words, lack of hearing the language of print, lack of vocabulary, lack of a repertoire of sentence patterns, etc. It is always tempting to blame television. However, it is likely true that in 1993, we no longer live in a print culture. It is certainly true that our students have very few public examples of language used well, precisely, and correctly.

If we want our young people to *use* language rather than be *manipulated* by it, and if we want them to be able to communicate effectively in many contexts, then we will need to address these goals from early childhood education on. We will have to include a great deal of practice with language—oral, read, written—in all of our language arts programs and in all other subjects. We will also have to emphasize exemplary language in many contexts. This study indicates that we have plenty of work ahead of us.

REAL LIFE ADVENTURES

Why no one diagrams sentences anymore.

Appendix

Tables 1 to 7

Major Assignment: Literature Composition
Errors in Conventions of Language in English 30 Diploma Exam Essays
Rated 3-Satisfactory

Table 1: Incidence and Type of Punctuation Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Comma Error	**7.5**	**35.7**	**56.9**
Colon Error	95.6	4.4	—
Semicolon Error	80.6	17.5	1.9
Capitals/ Periods	75.0	23.8	1.2
Apostrophe	**37.5**	**41.3**	**21.2**
Contractions/Abbreviations	98.1	1.9	—
Quotation Marks	87.5	12.5	—
Hyphenation/Dash/Parentheses	76.3	23.1	0.6

Average number of punctuation errors per essay = 7.7

Table 2: Incidence and Type of Sentence Structure/Construction Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

N = 160	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Shift in Point of View	72.5	26.9	0.6
Shift from Literary Present	53.8	42.5	3.8
Shift in Construction	66.9	29.4	3.8
Misplaced or "wrong" Modifiers	80.6	18.8	0.6
Run-on Sentences	66.9	31.3	1.8
Comma Splice	**45.0**	**45.7**	**9.4**
Incomplete Sentences	58.8	38.2	3.2
Confused Syntax	**35.6**	**55.0**	**9.3**
Faulty Parallelism	74.4	25.6	—

Average number of sentence construction errors per essay = 6.6

Table 3: Incidence and Type of Usage Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

$N = 160$	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Incorrect Adverbs	78.1	21.9	—
Incorrect Prepositions	**45.6**	**50.1**	**4.4**
Homonyms	68.8	30.7	0.6
Wrong Word (Semantics) *(other than verbs)*	**16.9**	**50.7**	**32.4**
Incorrect Semantic Relationship	62.5	29.4	8.1
Redundancies	73.1	26.4	0.6

Average number of usage errors per essay = 5.9

Table 4: Incidence and Type of Pronoun Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

$N = 160$	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Indefinite Pronoun Reference	**59.4**	**35.6**	**5.0**
Agreement with Antecedent	67.5	32.6	—
Relative Pronouns	**66.3**	**33.1**	**0.6**
Possessive Pronouns	93.1	6.9	—
Incorrect Pronoun Case	90.6	9.4	—

Average number of pronoun errors per essay = 1.9

Table 5: Incidence and Type of Verb Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

$N = 160$	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Subject/Verb Agreement	73.1	27.0	—
Shift in Tense	**64.4**	**31.3**	**4.4**
Wrong Tense	**63.1**	**35.1**	**1.9**
Misuse of Auxiliary Verb	82.5	16.9	0.6
Incorrect Passive Voice	96.9	3.1	—

Average number of verb errors per essay = 1.8

Table 6: Incidence and Type of Spelling Error in Essays Receiving 3-Satisfactory for Matters of Convention

$N = 160$	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4+ Errors
Double Letters	81.9	17.5	0.6
Y for I or ei/ie	82.5	16.9	0.6
Prefixes/Suffixes	91.3	8.7	—
Compound Words	82.5	16.9	0.6
General Spelling	**17.5**	**46.3**	**36.3**

Average number of spelling errors per essay = 4.1

Table 7: Most Frequent Errors in Conventions of Language in "Satisfactory" English 30 Diploma Exam Essays

$N = 160$	Percentage of papers having: 0 Errors	1–3 Errors	4–5 Errors	6–8 Errors	9–10 Errors	11–20 Errors
Table 1: *Punctuation*						
Comma Error	7.5	35.7	26.9	20.1	5.0	4.9
Apostrophe	37.5	41.3	11.2	7.5	1.9	0.6
Table 2: *Sentence Structure/Construction*						
Comma Splice	45.0	45.7	6.9	1.9	—	0.6
Confused Syntax	35.6	55.0	6.9	1.2	—	1.2
Table 3: *Usage*						
Incorrect Prepositions	45.6	50.1	2.5	1.9	—	—
Wrong Word (Semantics)	16.9	40.7	20.6	9.4	—	2.4
Table 4: *Pronouns*						
Indefinite Pronoun Reference	59.4	35.6	5.0	—	—	—
Relative Pronouns	66.3	33.1	0.6	—	—	—
Table 5: *Verbs*						
Shift in Tense	64.4	31.3	4.4	—	—	—
Wrong Tense	63.1	35.1	1.9	—	—	—
Table 6: *Spelling*						
General Spelling	17.5	46.3	16.3	12.5	5.0	2.5

The specific categories listed in this table are those that had the largest incidence of error (see highlighted sections in specific tables)

Sentence Structure/Construction

Shift in Point of View	1	
Shift from Literary Present	2	
Shift in Construction	3	
Misplaced or "wrong" Modifiers	4	
Run-on Sentences	5	
Comma Splice	5a	
Incomplete Sentences	6	
Confused Syntax	7	
Faulty Parallelism	8	

Punctuation

Comma Error	9	
Colon Error	10	
Semicolon Error	11	
Capitals/Periods	12	
Apostrophe	13	
Contractions/Abbreviations	14	
Quotation Marks	15	
Hyphenation/Dash/Parentheses	16	

Pronouns

Indefinite Pronoun Reference	17	
Agreement with Antecedent	18	
Relative Pronouns	19	
Possessive Pronouns	20	
Incorrect Pronoun Case	20a	

Verbs

Subject/Verb Agreement	21	
Shift in Tense	22	
Wrong Tense	23	
Misuse of Auxiliary Verb	24	
Incorrect Passive Voice	25	

Usage

Incorrect Adverbs	26	
Incorrect Prepositions	27	
Homonyms	28	
Wrong Word (Semantics) *(other than verbs)*	29	
Incorrect Semantic Relationship	31	
Redundancies	32	

Spelling

Double Letters	33	
Y for I or ei/ie	34	
Prefixes/Suffixes	35	
Compound Words	36	
General Spelling	37	

Index Number: _____

Estimated Length: *Circle One*

A (- 200)
B (201 - 400)
C (401 - 600)
D (601 +)

Degree of Complexity: *Circle One*

1 *None*
2
3
4
5 *Considerable*

Should have received 3 for Conventions:

Yes _____ No _____ What _____

Conventions of Language Study Grid

Matters of Convention

(Curriculum Concept 3)

When marking **Matters of Convention**, the marker should consider the correctness of

- mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc.)
- grammar (agreement of subject-verb/pronoun-antecedent, pronoun reference, etc.)

PROPORTION OF ERROR TO COMPLEXITY AND LENGTH OF RESPONSE MUST ALSO BE CONSIDERED.

5 **Excellent**: This writing is essentially free from errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The relative absence of error is impressive considering the complexity of the response.

4 **Proficient**: This writing is essentially free from errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Errors present do not reduce the effectiveness of the writing.

3 **Satisfactory**: This writing may have minor errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or grammar; nevertheless, the student demonstrates control of conventions.

2 **Limited**: This writing has frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or grammar. The student demonstrates lack of control of conventions.

1 **Poor**: This writing has errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or grammar that are both noticeable and jarring. These errors impede communication.

Matters of Correctness

(Curriculum Concept 3)

When marking **Matters of Correctness**, the marker should consider the correctness of

- sentence construction (completeness, consistency, subordination, coordination, predication)
- usage (accurate use of words according to convention and meaning)
- grammar (agreement of subject-verb/pronoun-antecedent, pronoun reference, consistency of tense)
- mechanics (punctuation, spelling, capitalization)

PROPORTION OF ERROR TO COMPLEXITY AND LENGTH OF RESPONSE MUST ALSO BE CONSIDERED.

5 **Excellent**: In this writing, the writer demonstrates confidence in control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. The relative absence of error is impressive considering the complexity of the response and the circumstances.

4 **Proficient**: In this writing, the writer demonstrates competence in control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. Minor errors in mechanics, grammar, and/or in complex language structures are acceptable and understandable considering the circumstances.

3 **Satisfactory**: In this writing, the writer demonstrates control of the basics of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. There may be occasional lapses in control of sentence construction and usage, and/or minor errors in grammar and mechanics. However, the communication remains clear.

2 **Limited**: In this writing, the writer demonstrates a faltering control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. The range of sentence construction problems and errors in usage, grammar, and/or mechanics blurs the clarity of communication.

1 **Poor**: In this writing, the writer demonstrates lack of control of correct sentence construction, usage, grammar, and mechanics. The unclear and incorrect sentence constructions and jarring errors in usage, grammar, and mechanics impair communication.

Credit

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